

Bailero For Dead Lovers

*For Betty and Mike Priestley who died together in
a car accident on a wet night in 1987.*

On those summer evenings how we talked
from light to dark and on, inside your room.
Here's your remembrance:
overlapping voices, knotted arguments, opinions let loose
like punctuation marks spilling from books
on floors, on wall, on chairs, on laps.
An ancient mongrel circulates.
Her eyes are different colours, but one tail wags for all.
She settles, snores against a woman knitting in a high-backed chair,
a hard, black chair.
Through a doorway, there, where the crumpled tablecloth
is not completely cleared, a burly man,
black-bush beard, bare legs and thong-flat feet even in winter,
frowns into a homework stack, marks it
sensibly. But now and then he says outrageous things aloud
to knock apart a serious night . . .
Hey up! something orange, pad-pawed, purring,
leaps and steps a mincing minuet
between glasses dregged with claret.
She scratches, yawns, is forcibly removed
but jumps back up, threshes her tail three times, and stays.
The woman lays aside her wool, calls to the man who answers her.
Children tug at sleeves; babies on the floor get into things –
adolescents, cats, dogs, visitors –
the young demanding help, the old in need of love.
Their bread is spread with conversation and the wine's
bouquet is hospitality.

I am blind tonight. I steer a steamed car
against assaults of wind and hail as hard
as unshed tears. Red light – green light –
wrench gears – gently on the brake –
switch on the radio; the music's out of rhythm
with the relentless swish and swash of windscreen wipers.
I sail on a dazzling road-river
that could sweep me, terrified, to time's dark place.
But then – Te Kanawa – 'The Songs of the Auvergne':
Bailero lo . . .

Kiri singing pours me, tears and all,
out of the rim of winter into a warm night
of other, dearer voices.

Outside my car the world howls
but here I have the best of company
for you have come to shelter from the storm.
We never spoke of the Auvergne
or of its old French songs; I don't remember
that we ever mentioned Cantaloube
the polisher of rough-stone love songs,
and how he lifted them
into the light of an exquisite voice
to blaze like suntraps
until light and time were stopped.